

Franková, Milada

**"Come along, quick, quick, don't keep father waiting" : family drama in Edna O'Brien's Virginia**

*Brno studies in English*. 2006, vol. 32, iss. 1, pp. [99]-111

ISBN 978-80-210-4558-3

ISSN 1211-1791

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/104087>

Access Date: 18. 02. 2024

Version: 20220831

Terms of use: Digital Library of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University provides access to digitized documents strictly for personal use, unless otherwise specified.

MILADA FRANKOVÁ

## **“COME ALONG, QUICK, QUICK, DON’T KEEP FATHER WAITING.” FAMILY DRAMA IN EDNA O’BRIEN’S *VIRGINIA***

The article draws attention to Edna O’Brien’s play *Virginia* (1980), a biographical play sweeping through the life of Virginia Woolf from her early childhood to her death in 1941. The purpose of the article is twofold: to trace the family drama of *Virginia* in relation to Woolf’s biography and read O’Brien’s choices in creating the play as postmodern pastiche.

Edna O’Brien’s play *Virginia* was first performed at the Stratford Festival, Ontario in 1980 and subsequently published in 1981. The Ontario production was brought to the Theatre Royal, Haymarket in London for a short season in 1981 with Maggie Smith in the title role, for which she won the *Standard* drama award for the best actress. *Virginia* is a dramatic retrospection of Virginia Woolf’s life, from childhood memories to her death, an ingenious combination of Woolf’s biography and writing. In fragments and hints, the play also touches upon the development of family relationships in the twentieth century, from the patriarchal father and the self-denying mother – the “angel in the house” – to relationships with their children, both small and adult, to the aftermath of the children’s upbringing, to sibling relations and the modern marriage. Also, there are echoes in it of the feminist debate on the limitations that the family and society impose on women. Although the facts from Virginia Woolf’s life and the arguments and ideas of the period resonate with the concerns of O’Brien’s other writings, she allows a sense of Woolf’s own words dominate the text of the play. The purpose of this paper is therefore twofold: to trace the family drama of *Virginia* in relation to Virginia Woolf’s (auto)biography and read Edna O’Brien’s choices in creating *Virginia* as postmodern pastiche.

The visibility of Virginia Woolf’s family in her own writing, whether fiction or other, as well as in writings about her, is undeniable. It has been widely acknowledged that the novel *To the Lighthouse* (1927) represents a kind of impressionist portrait inspired by her family. There are several well-known and frequently referred to family events and relationships in Woolf’s biography which appear

to be of crucial importance: the damaging effect on young Virginia of the early loss of her mother, the problematic relationship with her father, the move after her father's death from the family home in Kensington to a "new" life with her brothers and sister Vanessa in Bloomsbury, her marriage to Leonard Woolf. And even outside the personal and private, as Martin Hilský points out, the central passage of Woolf's artistic credo concerns family relationships and their change as a necessary condition of her modernist literary experiment (1995: 158).

As a novelist and short-story writer, O'Brien usually portrays women in sexual and social relationships, battling with all kinds of family ties. But first and foremost, she offers the reader quasi-psychological, lyrical miniatures of female sensuality, sometimes harsh, sometimes comical, but always eloquently emotional (see *August Is a Wicked Month* 1965; *Casulties of Peace* 1966, *Night* 1972; *Time and Tide* 1992). In this respect O'Brien's *Virginia* does not fall outside the pattern of her prose writing in the sense that it also affords deep enough insights into the protagonist's psyche. And if O'Brien does not foreground the family aspect of Woolf's life in the play, she certainly does not avoid it. What is more, although *Virginia* seems to fit O'Brien's paradigm, the author herself remains successfully hidden behind Virginia the heroine of the play, as of course she should, but also behind Virginia Woolf the person and the novelist, whose biography she has largely recreated here from Woolf's own writing. Woolf's presence in the text of the play is therefore doubly palpable.

### Writing lives

The play may be viewed as part of a richly developing tradition and new fashion of rendering fictionalised biographies of famous lives in all of the three available media: novel, drama or/and film. Margaret Forster, after having written the award-winning biography of Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1988), made the poet appear again in her novel *Lady's Maid* (1990), whose heroine Elizabeth Wilson was Barrett Browning's real servant. Peter Ackroyd has conjured up thrilling fictions with passages from the life of Wilde, Chatterton and Milton (*The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde*, 1983; *Chatterton*, 1987; *Milton in America*, 1996). In their different ways all of them, in Joe Moran's words, "tread a line between historical reclamation and literary invention" (1999: 357). In drama, Tom Stoppard's *Arcadia* (1993) employs a fragment of Lord Byron's life and *The Invention of Love* (1997), with Oscar Wilde and A.E. Houseman, comments on the misinterpretation of biography. In the film script of *Shakespeare in Love* (1998), together with Marc Norman, Stoppard famously creates a romantic episode from Shakespeare's life as a source of the Bard's dramatic inspiration.

In the same year as *Virginia*, Edna O'Brien also wrote *James and Nora: a Portrait of Joyce's Marriage* (1981), to be followed by a full though brief biography of James Joyce almost twenty years later (*James Joyce*, 1999) with excellent insights according to McGurk (2000: 56), from a feminist perspective, as pointed

out by William Pratt (2001: 126). Nor was Edna O’Brien the first to write a play about Virginia Woolf. In 1973, *A Nightingale in Bloomsbury Square*, a one-act play by Maureen Duffy about Virginia Woolf, Sigmund Freud and Vita Sackville West, was staged at the Hampstead Theatre Club (“Play about Virginia Woolf”). Nevertheless, this way of popularisation of biography with or without an admixture of fiction is at the same time seen as controversial, raising questions about the truth and morality of some of the disclosures. At the bottom line, the debate of course also involves all the difficulties and dilemmas of biography proper.

Virginia Woolf comments on biography in her volume of essays *The Death of the Moth* (1942), speculating on the contrast that “the novelist is free; the biographer is tied” (120). But she debates more subtle distinctions than merely pitting the freedom of the artist against the constraints of the factographer. In her opinion the early, Victorian, biographer was tied by conventions even more than by facts. There were facts that he was not allowed to disclose and areas that he was not allowed to enter. It was only towards the end of the nineteenth century that the readers’ curiosity about the protagonists’ lives won over conventional restrictions and the biographer gained more freedom to handle the facts. But then, regarding the biographer’s factual material, Woolf makes a surprisingly (post)modern, culturalist observation when she claims that even some biographical facts are “subject to change of opinion”:

Thus the biographer must go ahead of the rest of us, like the miner’s canary, testing the atmosphere, detecting falsity, unreality, and the presence of obsolete conventions. His sense of truth must be alive and on tiptoe. Then again, since we live in an age when a thousand cameras are pointed, by newspapers, letters, and diaries, at every character from every angle, he must be prepared to admit contradictory versions of the same face. (124)

Together with this prediction Woolf also foresaw that biography, which she believed to be in its beginnings in her time, had “a long and active life before it” and commended it for stimulating the imagination (126). Maybe she suspected that the kind of imaginative biography had already begun with Lytton Strachey, whose work she admired. She said of his *Elizabeth* that Strachey “treated biography as an art and flouted the limitations” (122) that the traditional, conventional approach to biography required. Woolf herself experimented with biography in *Orlando* (1928), sometimes generically described as “a fantastic biography”, (*Concise Oxford Companion*, 623) and in *Flush* (1933), a “biography” of a dog. In 1940 she published a biography of Roger Fry.

Biography in our postmodern age makes ample use of at least two of the elements that Woolf remarked upon as a crucial development in biography writing: attention to detail and the possibility of treating biography as an art. This is also remarkably true of how Edna O’Brien reconstructed the life of Virginia Woolf in *Virginia*: with plenty of intimate detail and the art of postmodern pastiche as her principal tools.

### O'Brien's words, Woolf's words: pastiche

Pastiche is understood here in the widest sense of the term as a literary work composed of words and sentences from another writer and/or written partly or entirely in the style of another period, another writer or other writers (Cuddon 1991: 685–86; Baldick 1990: 162). In *Virginia* O'Brien has done just that in relation to Virginia Woolf's work as Irving Wardle observes: "How much of the text is O'Brien and how much subedited out of the heroine's indefatigable day-by-day self-observations, is beyond me to disentangle" (1981: 12). Nor is it the purpose of this paper to embark on such a futile task. Moreover, the origins and life of many of Virginia Woolf's words are multiple. For instance her words "moments of my being", which also Virginia speaks on her first appearance on stage, have gained currency particularly since 1976 with the publication of *Moments of Being*, Woolf's until then unpublished autobiographical writings. Thus, it may be suggested that O'Brien's drama is created as a rich collage of authentic words and approximations where the informed reader/audience can happily play the spot-the-quote game.

There is no doubt that *Virginia* is a biographical play, with known facts closely adhered to despite some, mostly elliptical, repositioning. O'Brien takes her audience/reader on a fleeting journey through Woolf's life from recollections of her childhood to her suicide by drowning in 1941. Most of it is told by Virginia herself in interaction with her father (Man), her husband (Leonard) and her friend Vita Sackville-West (Vita). The sweep of action pauses at crucial as well as trivial moments known from Woolf's biography and writing. There are two hazy exchanges with her father, a sharp memory of her mother's death, her coming-out ball, snatches of conversations from Bloomsbury Thursdays and from the Gordon Square household with her sister Vanessa, the decision to marry Leonard Woolf, intimations of the terror of Woolf's mental disease, scenes from their marriage, the foundation of the Hogarth Press, their literary and social life, images from Virginia Woolf's relationship with Vita Sackville-West, the appearance of *Orlando*, the hurt of adverse criticism of Woolf's work, descriptions of bombed-out London, the seclusion of the Woolfs' life in the country during the war and Woolf's final, lost battle with her disease.

### Family drama

The play is in two acts. Act 1 has a strong sense of the more distant past, triggered off at the very beginning by the presence of Virginia's father. He is in fact the first to appear on the stage, very much in keeping with his dominant position in the family as Virginia describes it: "... he permeated, he prevailed, he demanded [...] that imperious need ... Do this, do that ... his dominance, his 'Submit to me'" (11). Although in his entrances onto the stage he is only marked as Man, suggestive of not only his own but the general contemporary male dominance and

distance, there is no doubt as to his identity. In the few exchanges between The Man as the father figure and Virginia, Leslie Stephen comes across true to his reputation and his portrayal as Mr. Ramsay in Woolf's novel *To the Lighthouse*: demanding and authoritative, the one who makes the decisions in the family. In real life one of the leading intellectuals of his time, author of books on the eighteenth century, editor of the *Dictionary of National Biography*, here in the play he is captured wearing a great-coat with a book in each of its several pockets and thought by Virginia to be "so selfish and so stingy" (12). Virginia's aversion to the all-powerful patriarch is shown to start with her mother's call to her: "come along, quick, quick, don't keep Father waiting" (10). It increases with her maturity to "hate rising in me against him, sharpening, sharpening. Does it spread to all other men" (12), and culminates at the last appearance of the Man/Father on the scene in Virginia's final callous "if you must die, why don't you," with which Virginia "snaps closed the book that he was reading" (14).

The hate that spreads to all other men, "men in conflict for the different parts of my body" (12) applies in particular to another family figure in the patriarchal role, moreover a role severely abused. Virginia's half brother George takes her to Lady Sligo's coming-out Ball and then rapes her. Analyzing the same passage, Amanda Greenwood goes further than the suggestion of men's dominance over Virginia's body and mind and examines the "different parts" in terms of fragmentation of the female body and the necessity for masquerade (61). For a different perspective it might be useful at this point to return to Woolf's view, already quoted earlier, that some biographical facts are subject to "change of opinion" (*The Death* 124). Cases of sexual abuse in the family and incestuous relationships would have been hushed up in the early decades of the twentieth century. The Victorian morals of the (upper) middle classes did not allow an open disclosure or even general discussion of such facts. In contrast to that, with the gradual dismantling of Victorian family attitudes since the 1950s, by the time O'Brien's play was written in 1980, the existence of such family secrets had often come to light, opening the floodgates of public debate and a wave of trust in the benefits of psychotherapy for victims of frequently only much later recalled sexual abuse perpetrated by parents on their children (see Marwick 1990: 144, 367). O'Brien's interest in the social and institutional aspects of relationships may be traced throughout her writing although it was overlooked by critics in her early novels as Greenwood argues (2003: 60).

Virginia's rebellion against patriarchy extends to the institution of marriage as part of it, providing the traditional setting for male dominance. In the play, the connection and continuity between patriarchy and marriage is realised through the figure of The Man, impersonated by the same actor, who is first the father and then reappears as Virginia's husband Leonard Woolf. Edna O'Brien's and Virginia Woolf's primary interest in the conflict between the sexes seems to overlap here. Woolf's reflections of the Ramseys' married relationship in *To the Lighthouse* find echoes in the dialogue between Virginia and Leonard which fills O'Brien's play. Virginia repeatedly thinks of marriage as a strange thing, "all

that copulation” (10). Moreover, in Woolf’s view, patriarchal marriage as she witnessed it, not least in her own family, involved a total submission on the part of the wife. Michele Barrett, in the introduction to the 1979 edition of Woolf’s essays *Women and Writing* (1925) quotes from Woolf’s first novel *The Voyage Out* (1915): “She gave way to him; she spoilt him; she arranged things for him; she who was all truth to others was not true to her husband, was not true to her friends if they came in conflict with her husband” (16). This, too, has a close parallel in the play, where Virginia is remembering her mother and her parents’ marriage: “Her pride in him was like the pride of one in some lofty mountain peak visited only by the light of the stars, noble, yes, enthusiastic, yes, but humble, too humble” (10).

For Virginia the mother figure has a very special and in one respect almost fatal importance. The defining moments of the relationship as known from Woolf’s biography and fiction appear in a few scattered lines. First comes the image of the too humble and too enthusiastic supporter of the husband, the functioning of the married relationship being inaccessible to the child, who is jealous of Father and wants Mother to herself: “My mother, his wife, not at all the same thing” (10). Then the roles of the wife and mother are combined and interwoven in the image of the caring “Angel in the House” – the proverbial custodian of Victorian domesticity (Calder 1997: 141): “When she was presiding it was all very moving and very stirring, the room full of people, her several children, the nursery ceiling very high and plates and plates of innocent bread and butter” (*Virginia*, 9). No matter how dignified, the mother figure is perceived as a victim of the patriarchal marriage and family, yet she is not denied a sense of autonomy, though very private and only secretly observed: “She took a look at life, and she had a clear sense of it, something real, something private which she shared neither with her children, nor with her husband” (9). “Death plays havoc” (10) – the three words finally sum up the lifelong devastating effect that the loss of her mother had on Virginia.

Similarities between Woolf and O’Brien in their biographies and literary themes concerning woman, mother and patriarchy have been pointed out by Dawn Duncan (qtd in Greenwood 2003: 59) while Greenwood looks for rather different links between the maternal imagery of O’Brien’s *Mother Ireland* (1976) and “the desire to conceptualize a literary ‘mother’” by *Virginia* (58). Closer to the real mother link, Edna O’Brien, too, admits that her “whole life and being are so intermixed with hers [her mother’s]” (Conrad 1996: 24). The conflation of the mother figure in its many aspects with the literary language of both Woolf and O’Brien in the play is obvious.

### The Gothic resonances

Virginia Woolf’s trauma of her mother’s death later resulted in bouts of severe mental disorders rendered by O’Brien in haunting scenes in act 1, scene 3, sug-

gestive of the Gothic mode: "Whatever hour you woke there was a door shutting. From room to room they went, hand in hand, lifting here, opening there, making sure – a ghostly couple" (21). The Gothic reappeared in British fiction in the 1960s and has been widely used as an experimental element ever since, whether just in terms of the setting, plot or atmosphere or in complete modern recreations of the genre. In *Virginia*, the conjunction of family bereavement, madness and the Gothic sense need not appear to be coincidental. On the contrary, it has been pointed out that troubled family relationships and childhood traumas or disturbed adolescence are central to Gothic themes in literature, whether old or postmodern (Botting 1996: 6; Kilgour 1995: 33). O'Brien's mosaic of particular moments from Woolf's life apparently does not neglect this playful option for her postmodern drama either. The 1981 production of *Virginia* at the Theatre Royal, Haymarket, underscored the eery atmosphere visually. This is how Irving Wardle describes the scene: "a labyrinth of tall gauze screens, suggesting a conservatory or a deserted museum" (1981: 12).

It needs to be added that the arrangement of the gauze screens was the director's solution, because O'Brien eschews stage directions almost entirely. Apart from the initial instruction that "it is an abstract set" (7), the director is given freedom to experiment. The Gothic aspect of the labyrinth of gauze screens may at times appear secondary to their obvious psychological meaning reflecting the twentieth-century fascination with psychoanalysis which postmodern drama readily combines with theatricality. The symbiosis of the Gothic with the psychological encapsulates the tension of the moment and transfers it across the time layers of memory and present reality suggested by the screens.

The ghostly air of act 1, scene 3 produced by the initial lines quoted above persists throughout the scene. It is pervaded by a dark atmosphere of enclosure and terror inhabited by Virginia's phantoms which she is unable to banish and for which "the treatment is no good" (21). Virginia is battling against the enclosure that a serious attack of her mental disease imposes on her and imprisons her both metaphorically and physically: "There is no gate, no lock, no bolt that you can set upon the freedom of my mind... and for me neither, no gate, no lock, no bolt" (22). Nevertheless she feels terrified that the danger of succumbing again to the darkness of illness is altogether real. In one breath she bravely acknowledges that "one must meet one's apparitions" (23), yet is seized by uncontrollable terror: "And the spiders are under my skirt. They're crawling up there, great long black... bestial. (*She is now in real terror and like an animal*)" (23). As this quotation suggests, the Gothic mode fits the scene not only in terms of the setting of isolation and dangerous enclosure, but also in terms of a narrative of fear, desire and sexuality, where the Gothic has frequently been employed (Botting 1996: 169).

The Gothic returns again towards the end of the play, in act 2, scenes 4, 5 and 6, when the Woolfs live in the country, exiled from London by the war and Hitler's bombing. While Leonard commutes to work, Virginia experiences "the contraction of life to a village radius" and senses the danger for herself of this new enclosure: "Our habits, our apparitions, these things you see me by, these



are pretences... Beneath it is all dark and it is spreading... ” (47). Being aware of madness closing in on her, she ends her life. The Gothic, still lingering in Leonard’s words – “there were heavy stones in the pocket of her jacket, it was terrible, it was the most terrible thing” – is eventually displaced by reality. Virginia was not saved as a Gothic heroine should be although the notion was mentioned in her farewell note to Leonard: “If anybody could have saved me it would have been you” (53).

### Women and writing

The family theme also comes to the fore in Woolf’s arguments in the debate about writing by women. In the play O’Brien has Virginia argue her case against her already dead father: “His life would have entirely ended mine – no writing, no rooks slicing the air, no stories, inconceivable” (14). What followed Woolf’s father’s death was also a total rejection of the old family lifestyle, the dismantling of the patriarchal household and opting out for a complete change by moving from the family home in Kensington to Gordon Square in Bloomsbury. But even this radical move was not enough to eradicate the roots of the deeply internalised culture of the patriarchal order. As Woolf confesses in a well-known essay, when she began to write she found that the first crucial task for her was to kill the “Angel in the House” in herself, to kill the woman who was always sympathetic, charming and unselfish: “She excelled in the difficult art of family life. She sacrificed herself daily [...] she never had a mind or a wish of her own” (*Killing* 3–4). For Woolf this was a life-or-death battle, for “she would have plucked the heart out of my writing” (4). Killing the “Angel in the House” was essential for really succeeding although writing, even professional writing, was potentially open to women. In Woolf’s opinion, this was because “the family peace was not broken by the scratching of a pen” (1). At the same time, writing undoubtedly afforded an escape for women from the constraints of the Victorian family. For Woolf, Juliet Dusinberre sees the enabling moment in gaining the new “female space” in Bloomsbury: “It spelled freedom from duty to the Victorian family, and the opportunity to launch their own professional lives, Virginia’s as a writer, Vanessa’s as a painter” (1997: 198). O’Brien only needs six lines for Virginia to describe the seachange in her life at that point, starting with the radical: “It was a question of throwing out all the old things” (14).

The revolt against the Victorian family cannot fail to carry feminist overtones. In *Virginia*, O’Brien raises Virginia’s dissenting voice about education or rather the lack of it for women. She was educated at home by her father while her brother went to university: “I wanted a mind, a man, a sparring partner, but they were all in Cambridge. My brother Toby was in Cambridge” (13). Most of the debate of course revolves around writing. In *Women and Writing* Woolf is convinced that the woman writer “still has many ghosts to fight, many prejudices to overcome,” among them “telling the truth about my own experiences as a body”

(12). In this respect, as Dusinberre confirms, Woolf was a pioneer and a prophet of what women writers and feminist criticism were to achieve. Moreover, Dusinberre calls Woolf “a cultural dissident” (2) and shows that the odds she was up against were high, because particularly as a literary critic she had no tradition of female literary scholarship to lean on. And as O’Brien neatly hints, she had formidable critics as a writer: “VIRGINIA: He [George Bernard Shaw] doesn’t like me, he doesn’t like what I write – too vapid, not practical enough, and not partial. Wyndham Lewis doesn’t like me either” (45). Ironically, almost the same criticism – for not being practical and partial – came from feminist critics later, only this time meaning that Woolf did not write about the day-to-day life of women and made no attempt to create new models of modern women, resulting rather in androgyny (Moi 1985: 5).

### Visual language

O’Brien does not overemphasise Woolf’s feminist attitudes, instead she foregrounds the specific uses of language. (“Mrs. Woolf it is said that you have remodeled the English language”, *Virginia* 47) Woolf’s experiment with language is also what Toril Moi offers as an argument to defend Woolf’s achievement against her critics from feminist ranks (9). In *Virginia* O’Brien makes language visual, everything happens in words, many of them Woolf’s own. O’Brien relies on pastiche where other contemporary dramatists work more through instructions on characterization and setting. The bare, Shakespearean stage of *Virginia*, with shots of Bloomsbury, London streets and the country projected on screens (7), underscores the sense that all the action is unfolding in Virginia’s mind, without any need for external trappings. The author can, moreover, count on an informed audience with enough knowledge of Woolf’s biography and *oeuvre* to let the language of pastiche fill the otherwise vaguely defined space of the stage.

As language is given a significant role in the play, it is not surprising that half way into *Virginia* a printing press takes centre stage (one of the few stage directions confirming its presence):

LEONARD. And you can look now.

[VIRGINIA turns around and sees the printing press.]

LEONARD. It’s a printing press. I got it in the Holborn viaduct for nineteen pounds, five shillings and fivepence.

VIRGINIA. What shall we do with it?

LEONARD. We shall print and we shall sell by subscription.

VIRGINIA. What shall we print? The k-aa-te sat on the m-aa-tte.

LEONARD. Come on, try it.

VIRGINIA. I’m afraid of it.

LEONARD. It will be good for you, something physical.

VIRGINIA. I know what I’ll print – (24)

On Virginia's birthday, right after her cure from protracted mental disease, the purchase of the printing press by Leonard and the foundation of the Hogarth Press embody multiple allusions. Besides symbolising a virtual rebirth for Virginia, her mind re-emerging from the shadows of madness, in reality it also enhanced Woolf's freedom to publish her work without having to make concessions to the traditional public (and publishers') taste.

What is more, the Hogarth Press (founded in 1917) in some sense combined for Woolf the public and the private spheres – the dichotomy that occupied an important position in her feminist thought. Dusiñberre draws attention to Woolf's study of the dividing lines between the oral tradition (in which both men and women participated) and the transition to print (which excluded women for a considerable time), the blurred boundaries between amateur and professional writing during the Renaissance, and the impact of the rigid division between the public (mostly male) scene and the private scene in Woolf's time (Dusiñberre 1997: 2-f; see Woolf, *The Diary* 35). In *Virginia* some of these preoccupations are also reflected in Virginia's encounter with Vita (Sackville-West) and the echoes of *Orlando*: "VITA: I know it from my experience as a man"(33). O'Brien's representation in the play of Woolf's life-work, her married relationship with Leonard Woolf and eventually her confession of regret at not having had children (45) are all part of that debate.

The fact alone that Vita appears in *Virginia* as one of the merely three characters in the play makes her significant. On the other hand, O'Brien does not seem to particularly dwell on the sexual aspect of Virginia's relationship with Vita, at least not as much as might be expected from a literary product of the British 1980s, marked by great openness about sexuality and homosexuality. It cannot be claimed that O'Brien is avoiding the issue either, because in 1981 she also tackled love between women in a short story called "Sister Imelda". Here a sexual relationship between the eponymous young nun and her teenage student is not consummated and their passion is portrayed in juxtaposition with the Madonna myth and the "pleasures of denial" (Shumaker 1995: 185). Although in *Virginia* Virginia and Vita's relationship does not seem to be that of sexual self-denial, its quality remains elusive. Here in particular O'Brien appears to be resorting to the Woolfian poetic impressionism instead of her own more explicit manner of writing.

The language of O'Brien's drama turns Woolf's modernist stream of consciousness into fragmented postmodern word play where monologues and dialogues are not always clearly distinguished, but merge together as the characters make their inconspicuous entrances and exits. This is also where O'Brien's celebrated skills of drama merge with the language of drama. The confessional stream of consciousness does not flow in a soliloquy, but is adapted to the modern dialogical form resulting in dialogue in monologue. Some of Virginia's monological appearances parade as dialogues with an absent person (e.g. with Nessa, who in fact never appears on the stage) in which, however, Virginia retains her emphatically self-centered first-person voice. O'Brien does not employ here the technique of

“textual you”, which she experimented with in her 1970 novel *A Pagan Place* (see Herman 1994: 378–400). Conversely, Virginia’s dialogue in monologue may at times seamlessly pass into a genuine dialogue, such as when Vita appears in person in act 2, scene 2 (31).

This technique however may be easier to enjoy on the page than from the stage. In his review Wardle complains that it is “extremely hard to take in the compressed phrase-making dialogue where every commonplace image (“proud as a peacock”) obtrudes like a missing button on a dress suit” (1981: 12). Here, too, the afore-mentioned lack of stage directions is apparent. There are no silences. The uninterrupted flow of dialogue in monologue turned genuine dialogue melting into monologue again suits the subjective predilection of postmodern drama, the postmodern need to construct subjective realities. O’Brien limits her intervention into the thematic interiority to minimal instructions for the actors, usually on the tone of speech only. She gives no directions as to Virginia’s dress. In Wardle’s view, Maggie Smith achieved amazing transformations on the stage in terms of Virginia’s age and character, wearing just a long drab skirt and a cardigan, “never suggesting Virginia Woolf’s obsession with good clothes [...] a blank canvass for the actress to fill” (12).

### Conclusion

Virginia’s mode of talking is designed to vary between high-spirited and ruminative and, as the character description has it, “when she is talking her ‘writing’ it is in another vein altogether – reflective, rapturous, dreamlike” (7). The addition of Virginia’s “talking her ‘writing’” to the merging of fact and fiction, or biography and invention, blurs and confuses the levels of artifice to the extent where it no longer seems possible or useful to separate them. It is precisely here that the postmodern uses of pastiche prove to suit the genre of fictional biography ideally. In *Virginia* O’Brien has mined and brought its possibilities to perfection, evoking the taste and spirit of the times through knitting together imitation, quotation and interpretation of recorded facts and events. O’Brien’s interpretation works indirectly through her choice of episodes and words from the vast array of material on Woolf rather than an intention to give it all a particular slant. In Wardle’s words London audiences “can snap up every glancing reference to Nessa, Clive, Lytton, and Buffles [...], and do not need to be told that she wrote books or operated a printing press” (12).

Still the portrayal of Virginia bears the imprint of the intense personality of the author. Edna O’Brien has been, somewhat unkindly maybe, described as “a volatile creature” with “loquacious hands” and a compulsion to “write her guts” (Conrad 1996: 22). Suzanne Weiss adds that she “uses words the way a juggler employs shiny balls, tossing them up, letting them spin, glitter and reflect off of one another, then catching them up and sending them aloft in new and startling patterns” and although Weiss says that of a much later play (*Triptych* 2003), it ap-

plies to *Virginia* equally well. This kind of juggling gave in turn enough freedom to the actress Maggie Smith “to represent on the stage what Edna O’Brien thinks was the essence of her [Virginia Woolf]” (Morley 1981: 9).

The image of drowning recited by Virginia at the beginning and at the very end of the play corresponds to the circular structure of modernist writing: “I dreamt that I leant over the edge of the boat and fell down. I went under the sea, I have been dead and yet am now alive again—” (9; 54). The modernist circular structure of beginnings in endings coincides with the underlying myth of the eternal return of time as well as with the modernist idea of time as private, plural and relative. Moreover, the relativity of the line “I have been dead and yet am now alive again”, particularly when repeated by Virginia at the end of the play, after her death, acquires multiple resonances. Feminist interpretation links it to the two female voices of Woolf and O’Brien, “one giving birth to another who gives birth to the former yet again” (Duncan in Greenwood 2003: 58–59). In a more lofty manner Priya V. Kaliyil states: “The final scene brings to the fore the pathos that was Virginia, quite literally and marks the end of her mortality and beginning of her immortality.” It also resonates with the postmodern predilection for open-endedness. From this point of view O’Brien’s negotiation of the modern and the postmodern aids the way fictional biography, in Greg Clingham’s words, “defers the closure of history”. Through the pastiche of Woolf’s personal and family drama and her writings as a novelist and a critic, O’Brien offers yet another re-interpretation of the writer’s life and work.

## References

- Baldick, Chris (1990) *Literary Terms*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Botting, Fred (1996) *Gothic*. London: Routledge.
- Calder, Jenni (1997) *The Victorian Home*. London: Batsford.
- Clingham, Greg (1998) ‘Chatterton, Ackroyd, and the fiction of eighteenth-century historiography’. *Bucknell Review*, 42.1: 35–52.
- Concise Oxford Companion to English Literature, The* (1990) Oxford: Oxford UP.
- Conrad, Peter (1996) ‘Books of blood and cochineal’. *Independent on Sunday*, 11 Aug. 1996, 22–24.
- Cuddon, J.A. (1991) *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Dusinberre, Juliet (1997) *Virginia Woolf’s Renaissance. Woman Reader or Common Reader?* London: Macmillan.
- Greenwood, Amanda (2003) *Edna O’Brien*. Harmond: Northcote.
- Herman, David (1994) ‘Textual you and double deixis in Edna O’Brien’s *A Pagan Place*’. *Style* 28.3: 378–400.
- Hilský, Martin (1995) *Modernist*. Praha: Torst.
- Kaliyil, Priya V. (2004) ‘Virginia – Edna O’Brien’. Accessed 13 December 2004, <[www.fresh-limesoda.com/reviews/](http://www.fresh-limesoda.com/reviews/)>.
- Kilgour, Maggie (1995) *The Rise of the Gothic Novel*. London: Routledge.
- Marwick, Arthur (1990) *British Society Since 1945*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- McGurk, John (2000) ‘Edna O’Brien on James Joyce’. *Contemporary Review (London)* 277.1614: 56–57.

- Moi, Toril (1985) *Textual/Sexual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory*. London: Methuen.
- Moran, Joe (1999) “‘Simple words’”: Peter Ackroyd’s autobiography of Oscar Wilde’. *Biography: an interdisciplinary quarterly* 22.3: 356–69.
- Morley, Sheridan (1981) ‘Maggie Smith: moving closer to Bloomsbury’. *The Times*, 27 Jan. 1981: 9. The Times Digital Archive 1785–1985. Accessed 5 January 2005.
- O’Brien Edna (1981) *Virginia*. Praha: ELK, 2004.
- “Play about Virginia Woolf” (1973) *The Times* 6 Sept. 1973: 13. The Times Digital Archive 1785–1985. Accessed 5 January 2005.
- Pratt, William (2001) ‘James Joyce’. *World Literature Today* 75.1: 126–27.
- Shumaker, Jeanette Roberts (1995) ‘Sacrificial women in short stories by Mary Lavin and Edna O’Brien’. *Studies in Short Fiction* 32.2: 185–93.
- Wardle, Irving (1981) ‘Unexplained, bloodless lethargy’. *The Times* 30 Jan.1981: 12. The Times Digital Archive 1785–1985. Accessed 5 January 2005.
- Weiss, Suzanne (2004) ‘Triptych – Edna O’Brien’. Accessed 13 December 2004 <[www.culture-vulture.net/Theater6/Triptych.htm](http://www.culture-vulture.net/Theater6/Triptych.htm)>.
- Woolf, Virginia (1979[1925]) *Women and Writing*. London: The Women’s Press.
- Woolf, Virginia (1947[1942]) *The Death of the Moth*. London: Hogarth, Fifth Impression.
- Woolf, Virginia (1981[1971]) *The Diary of Virginia Woolf. Volume 2 1920–24*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Woolf, Virginia (1995) *Killing the Angel in the House. Seven Essays*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Doc. Mgr. Milada Franková, CSc., M.A.  
 Department of English and American Studies  
 Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University  
 Arna Nováka 1  
 602 00 Brno  
[frankova@phil.muni.cz](mailto:frankova@phil.muni.cz)